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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the question whether or not forensics is a cult. The paper states that forensics can be compared to the criteria listed on the "Christian Apologetics and Research Ministry Homepage" which says that a cult is a group that is unorthodox, esoteric, and has devotion to a person, object, or new set of ideas. In keeping with that definition, a part of the forensics indoctrination process is to learn the specialized language of forensics. Also, a cult may have a non-verifiable belief system, and forensics coaches and students believe in things that cannot be proven to some extent. However, when forensics leaders are examined under the critical lens provided by the criteria, forensics can be differentiated from cults. Forensics leaders are not above reproach, nor do they claim to speak for God. The paper concludes that forensics is not a cult, but it has many cult-like characteristics. (CR)

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Forensics as a Cult:Lessons to be Learned

Fitting the Criteria: Individual Events

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T. Holm

Forensics as a Cult: Lessons to be Learned
Fitting the Criteria: Individual Events

Looking at forensics as a cult is a little unsettling. It is not that I am afraid I am going to find out that forensics is a cult (although that would concern me). What I find unsettling is, as I go through and examine the criteria for a cult and find that some criterion do fit, I also find myself saying some of the same kinds things that I have heard the cultists on television saying to the people who interview them. I find myself arguing that to the outside world it could look that way or that the rest of the world just does not understand. But the one though that really strikes home is how many times haven't we heard them say "We do these things of our own free will." I remember a section from Hindman, Shackelford & Schlottach's (1993) Working Forensics book entitled "The Forensics God." The forensics god has one overriding quality and that is "**total commitment**" (p. 282).

Using the same criteria for a cult as laid out by my colleagues I will attempt to examine forensics from the inside out. With a little help from my wife (a former forensicator) and mother (a strong forensics advocate), I will present a "truly objective" look at forensics, or as close as someone who has been doing forensics for well over half of his lifetime can present. OK, if you want to start worrying for me, start with this: I could think of virtually no one with whom I have a significant relationship who is not or was not involved in forensics. [See the later section on isolationism]

Applying the Criteria

In an attempt to maintain some consistency with the other panel members I contacted Joel Hefling and found out what kind of criteria he was going to describe to the group. The criteria identified here are primarily from the "Christian Apologetics & Research Ministry Homepage" as well. The criteria listed at that site are listed below along with an application to the individual events side of forensic participation.

It Is A Group That Is Unorthodox, Esoteric, And Has Devotion To A Person, Object, Or New Set Of Ideas

Well sure, we are a little unorthodox. Students talking to walls in hotels, students who miss one third of their Monday-Wednesday-Friday classes because of travel, students who spend hours sifting through large stacks of the latest periodicals cutting out articles that they think someone might ask them a question about at some point. Have you seen how the kids dress? I had a colleague point out it looked more like a funeral than a forensics tournament. Dressed like that and using the word forensics, no wonder people are looking for dead bodies.

Perhaps the pinnacle of our esoteric rituals would be Dramatic Duo: two people stand side by side, pretend to talk to each other but never look at each other, have scripts that they never look at, pretend to kiss (into the open air), and pretend to touch (but can't by the rules of the event). Anyone who has ever tried to explain what it is that we do to someone who has no idea about forensics knows how truly odd we sound in the harsh light of reality.

As far as the idea of a devotion to a person, object, or new set of ideas, I think we would all agree that most of the people involved in the activity exhibit devotion. Students may exhibit devotion to their coach (a person). We joke with students about being devoted to their script book (an object) and treating it like it was their child, never to be left alone even for a minute. It may be the devotion to a set of ideas that provides the greatest insight to our cult-like resemblance. Let's not forget how Hindman, Shackelford & Schlottach's (1993) described the "forensic god" as having "total commitment."

The ideas of forensics are not new. Certainly forensics ideals have existed for the last 2,500 years (Hunt, 1994). Periodically we change our activity and the nature of the way we conduct our activity. These changes may be an outward manifestation of our ideas and ideals. If we had a religious devotion to our ideas we probably would not be as likely or willing to change our ways. However, there are coaches with strong devotions to specific of the national organizations. The American Forensics Association, The National Forensics Association, Pi Kappa Delta, Delta Sigma Rho-Tau Kappa Alpha, and Phi Rho Pi all have members that could be considered quite zealous in their commitment to the organizations.

Some of the criterion applied under this umbrella include isolationist, apocalyptic, and use of indoctrination and deprivation into the group. Are we isolationists? Admittedly, one of the "Top Ten Sayings and Mottoes" on the Ohio University team shirts this year, the first saying is "If you are not part of forensics, you are part of the problem." That would seem to set up a dichotomous relationship between forensics and the rest of the world. But keep in mind, it is meant as a joke.

Unless we make a special effort to incorporate the rest of our university and/or community it becomes very easy to be isolated (Miller & Holm, 1997). On an interpersonal level the same can be said of us. Karns (1993) points out that we become *interpersonal* isolationists as well, stating "the only kind of relationships that are really sustainable when you are a full-time forensics coach is of the 'one dimensional variety'."

Coaches are not the only ones to suffer from these interpersonal voids, our students suffer the losses as well. Romances that spring up during the summer often break up once the season starts. I have heard more than one student comment on a relationship saying the relationship would not survive forensics. I distinctly remember a student who came in looking a little sad and told me of the romantic break up when the student's significant other presented the ultimatum "It's me or forensics." My student's response was "Well, I have a tournament to go to so see if you can be moved out when I get back." When the students willing to forgo interpersonal and romantic relationships for this activity, I think we can consider that isolationistic.

Are we apocalyptic? Well, sit through a prose round sometime. Unless you consider the subject matter of what we consider "good literature" to be apocalyptic, I would say we fail to meet this criterion. As a matter of fact we are probably considered optimistic. Informative rounds are filled with possibilities for the future and cures for cancer. [Finally, a criterion we don't meet!]

Do we indoctrinate our students? Yes, we do. Some schools have formal indoctrination ceremonies in which new members become part of a fraternal organization. Other schools have

informal rituals in which the new people have to pump the gas or carry the extemp. boxes or a variety of other initiations. Now there is a difference between indoctrination and initiation. We have probably all heard someone comment about a new competitor receiving a "baptism by fire." We realize that it takes a couple of tournaments for the high school competitor to become a college competitor and there are marks of achievement to denote advancement (trophies, national qualifications, etc.).

Another part of the indoctrination process is to learn the specialized language of forensics. From what is meant by "off-stage focus", to "breaking" (which oddly is a good thing), to the special abbreviations we use with such ease, learning the language is a critical component of the indoctrination process.

A Cult May Have A Non-Verifiable Belief System

Do we believe in things we can't prove? Maybe, to some extent we do. We can prove that we prepare students for success in life? We would like to think so. Enough people give testimony to the benefits they received from forensic activities that we could probably make that claim. Do we see the way we currently conduct our activity as representative of the skills the students will need upon graduation? Maybe this is where we value things that are not verifiable. Many of us have had the opportunity to send students into the real world setting (e.g. Rotary Clubs, campus speakers, etc.) and have found that we need to "re-coach" them for the real world performances.

We have informal rules that reflect the kinds of things we value. Even the most novice competitor "knows" that if someone has done your piece in the past you should find something

new. When asked, coaches will tell you that if they have seen a duo, for example, done in past years it lacks "freshness" for them and "invites undue comparison" and for those reasons the students should find a new duo. That is a value we hold. Now the question becomes is this an example of an unverifiable value.

Certainly the idea that the duo isn't fresh would be reasonable and verifiable, after all we have seen it before. But if a coach travels to 20 or more tournaments a year the chances of seeing the same duo team perform the same piece several times (especially if you don't have anyone doing duo) is quite high. Is it any less fresh at the end of one season than it is at the beginning of the next? No. What about the argument that it "invites undue comparison?" Coaches and judges seem to be able to set aside memories of other duos they have seen in other rounds and even other performances that this specific duo team may have given (good or bad). But it is admittedly harder to see something done and not compare it to a previous performance of the same material. But I have also seen (this year even) a judge comment that he/she had seen the duo done before and then note that this was the best he/she had ever seen it done but still it had been done before so the duo team should look for something new. There are other examples of these unverifiable values that manifest themselves in informal rules. For example, impromptu speakers should not use personal examples, ADS speakers should not use forensics humor (didn't we used to call that audience adaptation/analysis), you shouldn't do third person prose, persuasive speaking should fall into some kind of problem-solution format…only.

But are these examples of a "non-verifiable belief system?" They make perfect sense to us. We can give good reasons for them. One of the notations about a non-verifiable belief system is that the philosophy (our way of doing things) makes sense only if you adopt the full set of values

and definitions of the group. The only way to test these things is if they hold up in an out of forensics experience. Any coach who has ever re-coached a student for a public forum would probably, reluctantly, admit that our beliefs are a bit unverifiable.

Cult Ethos

Cult ethos refers to the character the cult tries to project to its members. Usually the cult will project itself as having extremely high moral standards, doing good works (God's work), and often use the Bible to further their position. Nearly all of us have probably found ourselves at some point talking about the greater good we serve, how we prepare students for life, for careers, and for success. We are proud of our forensics ancestry linking our activity with Aristotle, Plato, and Quintilian. We talk about the ways in which we serve the community. I am sure a few of our Directors could even quote passages from the Bible that showed the value of our pursuits.

We probably have holier-than-thou colleagues. They may over-emphasize the benefits of forensics, but for the most part the membership does not try to project itself as morally superior. As a matter of fact, our members are more likely to point out the shortcomings of the organization than exalt it.

The Leader (Frequently a Single Individual)

Who is the leader? Are we talking about one "forensic almighty?" Are we talking about the individual coaches at each institution? I would have to say that we do not have one over-riding leader. There is no individual without whom forensics could not operate. No one person we worship (beyond an individual level at least). Certainly we have known individuals who have had a tremendous impact on forensics as we know it {Grace Walsh comes to mind quickly here}.

Certainly some of our most influential leaders could be considered charismatic, a characteristic often associated with cult leaders. But when we talk about charisma in relationship to cult leaders examples of the difficult to define term "charisma" might be helpful. Our friends at the Christian Apologetics & Research Ministry Homepage (1998) offer the following examples:

1) The leader has received special revelation from God.
2) The leader claims to be the incarnation of a deity, angel, or special messenger.
3) The leader claims to be appointed by God for a mission
4) The leader claims to have special abilities

Anyone claiming one of the first three would scare most of us. But the fourth one, "a leader claims to have special abilities" is something we have seen. But, some people do have special abilities. Anyone who has coached a team to consistent top ten placings at national tournaments must have some kind of abilities (even if it is the ability to find and encourage naturally talented people). Whatever that ability is, it is special because the rest of us aren't doing it consistently.

We are dealing with a very unique group of people in forensics. Let's start by acknowledging that these are people with advanced college degrees. Less than one percent of the US population has a Doctorate Degree. Many of the coaches have a strong passion for what they do. Many of the coaches have enthusiasm and drive at a level that sets them apart from their colleagues. Many of the people who serve as coaches have been recognized by their own institutions for excellence in teaching. If our leaders claim to have special abilities it is because they do and even those outside the "cult" can recognize those abilities.

When we realistically examine our leaders under the critical lens provided by the Christian Apologetics & Research Ministry Homepage (1998) we can see this is where we differentiate

ourselves from cults. Our leaders are not above reproach nor do they (outwardly) claim to speak for God. Most would agree that there are members of "royalty" within forensics, but that is true of many, if not most, large organizations. Individual nutcases aside, no one in forensics claims to speak for God or predict or control the future.

Conclusions

This is the section where we ask, "So are we really a cult?" The answer is, in my "objective view": No forensics is <u>not</u> a cult, BUT…we have many cult like characteristics. Should those concern us? To some extent, maybe. As long as we keep a watchful eye on what we are doing, personally and professionally, we should be fine.

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